

An evaluability assessment of a West Africa based Non-Governmental Organization's (NGO) progressive evaluation strategy

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ABSTRACT

While program evaluations are increasingly valued by international organizations to inform practices and public policies, actual evaluation use (EU) in such contexts is inconsistent. Moreover, empirical literature on EU in the context of humanitarian Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) is very limited. The current article focuses on the evaluability assessment (EA) of a West-Africa based humanitarian NGO's progressive evaluation strategy. Since 2007, the NGO has established an evaluation strategy to inform its maternal and child health care user-fee exemption intervention. Using [Wholey's \(2004\)](#) framework, the current EA enabled us to clarify with the NGO's evaluation partners the intent of their evaluation strategy and to design its program logic model. The EA ascertained the plausibility of the evaluation strategy's objectives, the accessibility of relevant data, and the utility for intended users of evaluating both the evaluation strategy and the conditions that foster EU. Hence, key evaluability conditions for an EU study were assured. This article provides an example of EA procedures when such guidance is scant in the literature. It also offers an opportunity to analyze critically the use of EAs in the context of a humanitarian NGO's collaboration with evaluators and political actors.

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1. Introduction

The evaluation of humanitarian action has been defined as the “systematic and impartial examination of humanitarian action intended to draw lessons to improve policy and practice and enhance accountability” ([ALNAP, 2006](#), p. 14). The current article will examine the case of a humanitarian Non-Governmental Organization's (NGO's) *evaluation strategy* developed to support its health care user-fee exemption program based in Niger and Burkina Faso. According to [Crisp \(2004\)](#), such evaluations are “attracting unprecedented levels of donor funding and agency commitment, as well as public and political interest” ([Crisp](#), p. 4). While humanitarian evaluations are on the rise ([Wood, Borton, & Apthorpe, 2001](#)), empirical knowledge of evaluation use (EU)- which refers here to the use of evaluation *results* and *processes* (see [Patton, 2008](#))- in such contexts is limited and the few existing studies generally depict ineffective or even absent EU

([Hendricks, 1994](#); [Podems, 2007](#)). The literature describes various use-promoting factors, but whether these are applied in the humanitarian sector and the factors that affect their usefulness remains unclear and largely undocumented ([ALNAP, 2006](#); [Johnson et al., 2009](#); [Ridde, Goossens, & Shakir, 2012](#); [Sandison, 2006](#)).

To document conditions favorable to EU in a humanitarian context, we approached the earlier mentioned NGO because of its evaluation strategy that was developed to produce and diffuse empirical knowledge of its exemption program. A few particularities made us believe this evaluation strategy presented a great case to study EU. For example, we were told that its partners were working together since 2007 in the evaluation strategy and were particularly proactive and eager to integrate EU in the NGO's exemption program. In addition, they had actually developed a knowledge sharing/diffusion plan for disseminating evaluation results ([Dagenais, Queuille, & Ridde, 2012](#)). Our intended evaluation was to examine the conditions that influence the use of scientific evidence produced by the evaluation strategy. Yet, such evaluations require extensive resources (e.g. time, effort, and funds) and hence, we deemed it wise to first assess the program readiness for an evaluation ([Kaufman-Levy & Poulin, 2003](#); [Sanou, Kouyaté, Bibeau, & Nguyen, 2011](#)). We therefore, convened that a first sensible step was to conduct an *evaluability assessment (EA)*

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using [Wholey's \(1994\)](#) framework. The objective of the current paper is to determine whether the evaluation strategy is ready to be evaluated and whether such an undertaking is at once defensible, feasible, and deemed useful by its intended users. This last point on the usefulness of conducting an evaluation is particularly interesting because an EA has the potential to indicate the perceived usefulness of a future evaluation on EU to those implicated in the evaluation strategy. As [Wholey \(1994\)](#) suggested, if intended users are not receptive to evaluation findings, even the most informative of evaluations are a waste of time and resources. Hence, attending to the perceived usefulness of assessing the evaluation strategy and its ability to promote EU by those involved in the NGO's exemption strategy is an objective of the current EA of undeniable importance.

The current article provides an innovative stance as it presents in detail the conduct of an EA on an evaluation strategy in Africa. From our research in the literature and to our knowledge, this is the first EA of its kind in Africa to date. As noted in an [ALNAP Annual Review Series \(2001\)](#), evaluations in the humanitarian sector face particular challenges including considerable time pressures, insecurity, logistical difficulties, and increased risk of illness to name a few. Moreover, [Wood et al. \(2001\)](#) revealed that an important problem with humanitarian evaluations concerns a lack of clarity on the purpose and focus of humanitarian evaluations. Clearly then, EA is an extremely relevant activity to consider before undertaking any evaluation in a humanitarian context, yet it has so far received little attention in the associated literature in either African or other contexts. The current article will at once describe the steps undertaken by the authors to conduct their EA as well as the challenges they encountered using [Wholey's \(1994\)](#) framework.

1.1. The study context

Burkina Faso and Niger lie in the African Sahel, a region that was ravaged by a food crisis in 2005 and remains threatened by exceeding poverty and food scarcity ([Ridde & Diarra, 2009](#); [Wuehler, Hess, & Brown, 2011a, 2011b](#)). In the 2011 Human Development Report, Burkina Faso and Niger were ranked 181 and 186, respectively, out of the 187 countries listed in the human development index ([UNDP, 2011](#)). In 2009, life expectancy was estimated by the [World Health Organization \(2011\)](#) at 52 years in Burkina Faso and 57 years in Niger. While highlighting that the probability of death by age five is a critical indicator of children's well-being, the latest [UNICEF report \(2012\)](#) positioned Burkina Faso in third rank for the world's highest under-five mortality rate and Niger in the twelfth rank. In addition, maternal mortality ratios (per 100 000 live births) were estimated by the [World Health Organization \(2011\)](#) in 2008 at 560 in Burkina Faso and at 820 in Niger. These statistics illustrate clearly the dire situation in both countries.

In response to this crisis, HELP "*Hilfe zur Selbsthilfe e.V.*," the humanitarian NGO central to this paper, intervened with the chief objective of reducing maternal and child malnutrition, morbidity and mortality rates. The NGO established its user-fee exemption as an attempt to alleviate financial barriers to health care access. Hence, since 2006, the NGO subsidizes medical care for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers and children under age five in two districts of Niger, i.e. Tera and Mayahi ([Ridde & Diarra, 2009](#); [Ridde, Diarra, & Moha, 2011](#)). A HELP stakeholder reported that in 2007, their donors, the European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO), requested an external evaluation of the exemption program (*Health Staff 4*). Ever since, the NGO has progressively increased its evaluation utilization and efforts. In 2008, the exemption was extended to two districts of Burkina Faso (Dori and Sebba) where an actual evaluation strategy was developed in order

to provide feedback and ongoing support to the exemption. The evaluation strategy was developed progressively by a group of "evaluation partners" from Niger and Burkina Faso comprising of the NGO HELP staff, external evaluators, a representative from the donor agency ECHO and finally the *Directeurs Régionaux de la Santé (DRS)* and *Médecins Chef de District (DRS)*, who are the regional and district Ministry of Health authorities where the NGO's exemption is implemented. Progressively since 2007 these evaluation partners have shown a keen will to collaborate in support of the evaluation strategy and integrate EU in their work. Evaluating the evaluation strategy and the conditions that have fostered progressive EU by the strategy's partners and the exemption program personnel is our eventual objective but first, we have deemed essential to establish the evaluability of the evaluation strategy.

1.2. Evaluability assessments (EAs)

Evaluability assessments (EAs), also known as feasibility studies ([Tucker, 2005](#)), refer to the "systematic process for describing the structure of a program [the program here is the evaluation strategy] and for analyzing the plausibility and feasibility of achieving objectives; their suitability for in-depth evaluation; and their acceptability to program managers, policy makers, and program operators" ([Smith, 2005](#)). In 1979, [Wholey](#) documented the first exploratory EA process ([Smith, 2005](#); [Trevisan, 2007](#)). It examines four preliminary conditions to ascertain that: (1) the *program intent and its logic model* are clear and thus that program goals, objectives, important side effects, and priority information needs are well defined; (2) the *program is plausible* and hence its goals and objectives are conceivable; (3) relevant *data is accessible*; and finally that (4) the *utility* of an evaluation is clear among its intended users ([Wholey, 1994, 2004](#)).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

For the current qualitative case study, [Wholey's \(1994, 2004\)](#) EA framework was used to clarify whether the evaluation strategy was ready to be evaluated. For this assessment, 20 evaluation partners were interviewed in Niger and Burkina Faso during the summer of 2009. Participants were selected according to two *purposeful sampling strategies* ([Patton, 1990](#)). The primary evaluator and the NGO's head of mission were first selected according to the *intensity sampling* strategy (targeting persons greatly affected by the phenomenon studied) ([Patton, 1990](#)). From there, the *snowball sampling* strategy was employed whereby each informant was asked to recommend other information-rich sources. Caution was maintained throughout the EA to seek out the views of all evaluation partners and minimize the risks of "enclage" (i.e. the risk for the researcher to be assimilated within a given clique and estranged from other groups and/or the larger group as a whole) as [Olivier de Sardan](#) warned ([Olivier de Sardan, 2003, p. 49](#)). One author of the current study has accumulated over ten years of professional experience in the study context and his local knowledge was particularly helpful in avoiding sampling biases such as enclage. Interviewing multiple participants among the various categories of evaluation partners in both Niger and Burkina Faso was also done in order to increase the number of viewpoints and bolster the validity of our data collection and analyses through data triangulation ([Creswell & Plano Clark, 2006](#)). This intra-group diversification also served to increase the representativeness of evaluation partners and to seek out a global and diversified portrait of their collective experience ([Pires, 1997](#); [Stake, 2010](#)). In the end, the sample consisted of 14 locals and 6 expatriates. Participants

Table 1
Distribution of the participants.

Distribution of evaluation partners	Burkina Faso	Niger	Both countries	Total
HELP staff	4	2	1 (1)	7 (1)
External evaluators	5 (1)	2	1 (1)	8 (2)
ECHO representative			1	1
MoH authorities	3	1		4
				20 (3)

had collaborated on the evaluation strategy for a duration ranging between 3 and 28 months averaging to 14.7 months. Implication in the evaluation strategy was ongoing for 14 participants while it was intermittent for the other six. Table 1 presents the number of interviews conducted with the different participants who collaborated on the evaluation strategy either Burkina Faso, Niger or both of these countries. Three participants were interviewed twice as they were intensely engaged in the evaluation strategy and had more information to share than a single interview permitted (Table 1, numbers in brackets). Hence, a total of 23 interviews were conducted.

The semi-structured exploratory interviews lasted an average of 55 min, included open-ended questions and followed an interview guide approach. Interviews were conducted in French and their content was translated by the first author who is bilingual (French and English). The interview guide was not pre-tested as the explorative nature of the qualitative approach used in the EA sought flexibility in the use of the interview guide thus allowing it to evolve over the course of the EA. The investigation targetted Wholey's four conditions of evaluability assessment and sought to elicit descriptions of the items described in Table 2. Throughout all interviews the interviewer verified her understanding (i.e. "member checking") of the participants' viewpoints in order to bolster the validity of the findings (Stake, 2010; Van Der Maren, 1996). Interviews were recorded numerically and transcribed. Transcriptions served as the primary material for analysis. Documentation relevant to evaluation activities (e.g. evaluation plans/reports or evaluation partners' emails) was also collected to compliment interview data in order to triangulate data sources and to sustain the study's validity (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2006).

3. Analyses

Qualitative analysis of the interviews was completed using a thematic content analysis approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Using a mixed codebook, some codes emerged directly from the participants' discourse while others were based on the literature.

Table 2
The EA interview guide.

Evaluability assessment framework	Interview guide themes
(1) Program intent and logic model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planned evaluation and diffusion activities The intended impact of EU upon evaluation partners and the exemption The conditions that promoted the collaboration among evaluation partners
(2) Program plausibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluation and knowledge diffusion activities undertaken EU by evaluation partners The development of the evaluation strategy in the exemption, its professional and political context The conditions and factors that facilitate and challenge the objectives of the evaluation strategy
(3) Data accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How the participants experience, engage with, act upon, and value EU Existing evaluation-related documentation (e.g. evaluation-related plans, reports, and emails) and whether it may be accessible for analysis
(4) Utility of an evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants' perceptions of the usefulness of an evaluation of EU The strengths and limits of the evaluation strategy's activities The value of EU in the NGO's exemption program

For example, Alkin and Taut's (2003) evaluation, human, and contextual factors known to influence EU helped discern themes and patterns in the interviews. Wholey's four evaluability conditions were also used to form four columns of our matrix in which the different themes were classified. This helped organize the emergent themes. To assure coding consistency, the coder re-examined and adjusted, when necessary, the correspondence between all coded excerpts and the codebook. While the data analysis itself was not validated by a second person, the preliminary findings were presented to three key evaluation partners (the principal evaluator, the evaluation strategy coordinator and the NGO's chief stakeholder) for validation purposes. Findings were generally validated while some modifications were recommended and upheld on the logic model. Each column was analyzed by itself and compared to those of other participants. This process enabled us to dress a comprehensive portrait of evaluation partners' shared experiences within the evaluation strategy while also drawing attention to the particularities of their experiences whenever relevant.

4. Results

4.1. Program intent and logic model

Interviews with the evaluation partners revealed a great deal of information on the first evaluability condition the purpose of which is to discern the intent and logic model of the program (i.e. of the evaluation strategy) (Wholey, 1994). Participants made clear that while EU was a shared goal during the first evaluation in 2007 in Niger, the intent to develop an actual evaluation strategy to inform the exemption program via a series of evaluations was not an explicit goal from the start. To create a coherent logic model of the evaluation strategy we examined the initial dynamics that spurred its development.

As illustrated in the preliminary logic model (Fig. 1), the NGO's first evaluation was conducted in 2007 in Niger (top row) by the principal evaluator from the Université de Montréal who was accompanied by two colleague evaluators from a Niger research institution. Members of the NGO staff, stakeholders and donors along with the Ministry of Health representatives participated in various ways in the evaluation. It is hypothesized that various factors may have promoted the implementation of the evaluation strategy and of EU within the NGO's exemption program. Such hypothesized factors include the fact that, the evaluation undertaken had employed a practical participatory and utilization focused approach and that evaluators were experts in the field and knew the NGO context. Other interpersonal factors may have also contributed. These factors remain hypothetical as they will need to

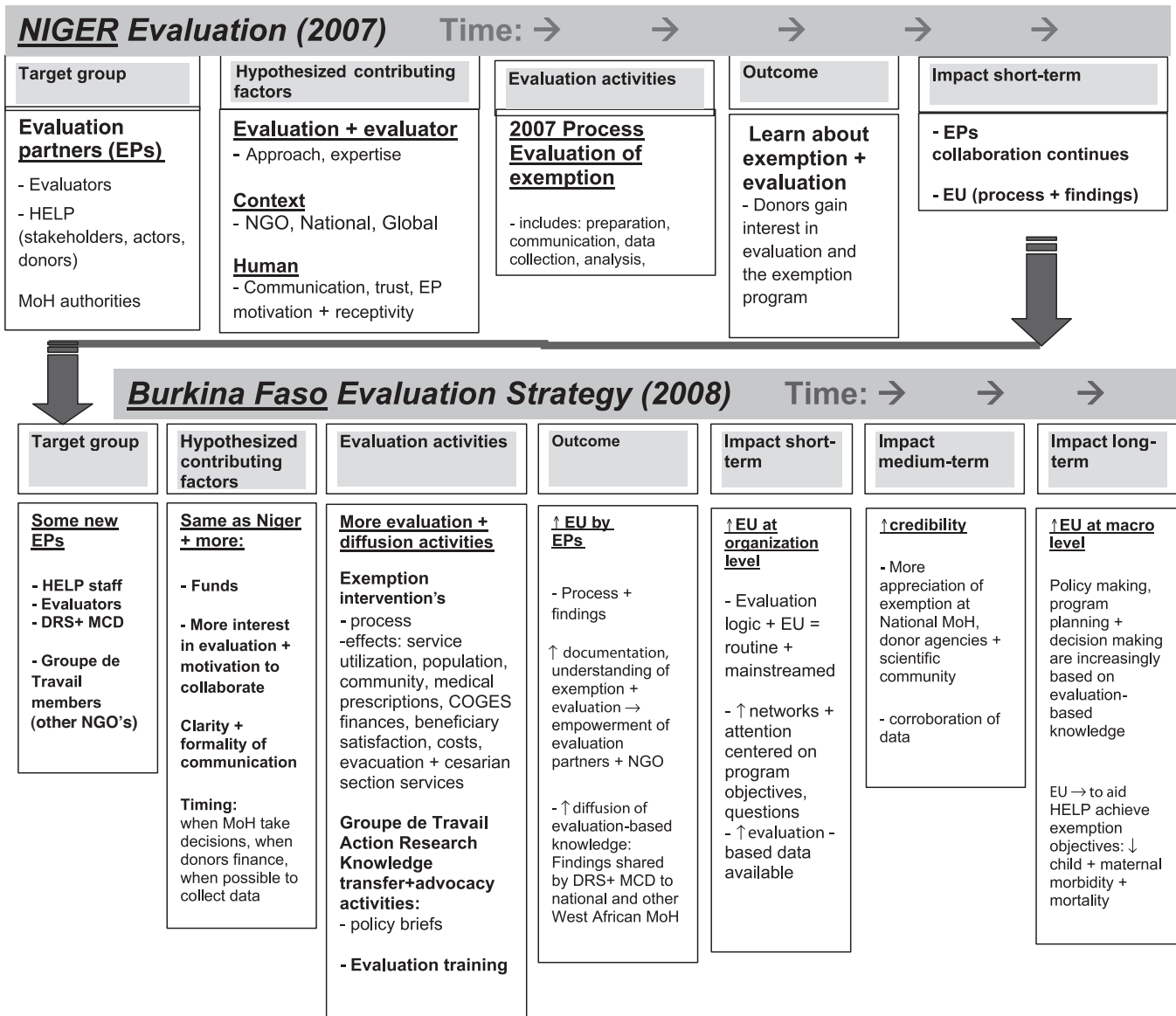


Fig. 1. The preliminary logic model of the NGO's evaluation strategy.

be verified during the future EU evaluation study. In the months following the first process evaluation in Niger, the principal external evaluator noticed that the evaluation recommendations were being upheld by the NGO (Ridde, Diarra, & Moha, 2007). Evaluation partners learned new things about the exemption program, began changing their views of evaluators and the evaluation process (e.g. as helpful rather than punitive), and began using evaluation findings to bring change to the NGO's functions. This encouraged the evaluator to maintain contact with the NGO stakeholders.

As a donor representative mentioned, Burkinabes were crossing the border to seek free health care in Niger's HELP funded clinics (ECHO Representative 1). This spurred the organizational will to extend the exemption program into Burkina Faso. While planning for this extension, the NGO director solicited the expertise of the principal Niger evaluator who subsequently acted as a scientific advisor for the NGO's planning phase in Burkina Faso, which began over the year 2008 (bottom line of logic model). Care was taken to integrate lessons learned in the Niger evaluation and the key decision was to develop the *evaluation strategy* to undertake

(1) documentation and (2) advocacy activities in order to support the scaling up of the exemption program.

Incorporating EU further into Burkina Faso's exemption program (bottom line of logic model) meant that funds, evaluation and networking activities (e.g., with a Groupe de Travail made up of various NGOs) were increased significantly. For example, a staff member was employed specifically to coordinate the scientific activities. In addition, more collaboration was sought from the Ministry of Health DRS/MCD who provided precious access to valuable data (e.g., collected at their health centers) and a credible voice within existing political platforms. Numerous factors are hypothesized to have contributed to EU and examining such factors will be the central objective of our future EU evaluation study. The number of evaluation activities increased notably with evaluations examining the processes and effects of the exemption program. During the EA, we also sought evaluation partners' objectives for the evaluation strategy.

By integrating participatory evaluations into the exemption's mission, evaluation partners intend (*outcome* section of the model) to gain insights on the exemption, build their evaluation capacities

and feel increasingly comfortable using evaluations. However, the main goal of the documentation activities is to produce evidence on the NGO's exemption. The goal of advocacy activities is to disseminate this knowledge via national workshops, reports, policy briefs to Burkina Faso's civil society, the scientific community, international NGOs and organizations, and most importantly, government authorities in Burkina Faso and the Sahel Region. These activities all aim to inform policy makers on effective user-fee exemption strategies so that decisions concerning maternal and child healthcare may be based on evidence and in turn be more equitable.

The long-term intended impact is that EU becomes routine in evaluation partners' practice and that policy makers collaborate increasingly with them to mainstream evidence into their decision-making process. Ultimately, evaluation partners hope that via gradual EU, maternal and child morbidity and mortality rates will be reduced. Understanding the evaluation partners' shared intent and goals and determining the logic model was made possible via the EA interviews.

4.2. Plausibility of the evaluation strategy

The second evaluability condition examines program reality (Wholey, 1994) and hence, in this case, it is meant to examine the plausibility of achieving the evaluation strategy's goal and to examine whether the preliminary logic model is realistic. In other words, Wholey (1994) suggests that the intended program, and logic model, should be compared with the actual program resources, activities, and outcomes to examine whether the links between these components are deemed plausible. He also suggests examining the feasibility of measuring program performance and estimating the likelihood of program success. Seen as EU is the ultimate goal and that its measurement is not one of our objectives, we determined it would be more valuable to examine in detail the types of evaluation activities and the factors that seem to support the evaluation strategy so far. In this manner, we will assess whether these factors and activities are linked to the actual outcomes and whether the goals seem achievable in the given context. This is where Alkin and Taut's (2003) three categories of factors (i.e. *evaluation, context, and human factors*) known to influence EU were useful in grouping our findings.

4.2.1. Plausibility: evaluation and evaluator factors

The first factor concerns the evaluation process and the evaluator characteristics. If we turn to 2007, evaluation findings from the first evaluation in Niger were presented to the NGO stakeholders and staff who were receptive to the evaluators' constructive criticism and recommendations. Yet, they were resistant to have the "negative" results divulged to their donors fearing that funding would be compromised. Following frank but difficult conversations, the principal evaluator tactfully negotiated to have the final report sent to the donors. According to a donor representative it was normal and even important, "*we really want to advance [...] to question principles that are obvious to others but are not at all obvious to us and we want to militate, and this is the spirit I recognize [in the evaluations] which pleases me*" (ECHO Representative 1). He also appreciated the quality of the scientific activities because as he says "*they are all pertinent and interesting*" (ECHO Representative 1). In the end, the NGO's funding was renewed and its personnel were able to apply the evaluation-based recommendations to improve the exemption program. One of the NGO stakeholders (HELP Staff 4) noted that ever since the Niger evaluation, the exemption program has benefited from ongoing scientific activities and the advice of the external evaluators. Evaluations performed within the evaluation strategy generally employ a pluralistic participatory approach that is utilization focused (Patton, 2008). Hence, evaluation partners are

involved in, and generally in accord with, the various stages of the evaluation process. A positive interplay between resources allocated to the scientific activities and the quality of the evaluations appears to perpetuate a positive collaboration among evaluation partners and the ongoing implementation of the evaluation strategy. Interviews therefore suggest that a relatively high level of trust and satisfaction has been established among the evaluation partners. It appears that all of these factors act in favor of EU and strengthen the links between the evaluation activities and the goals of the evaluation strategy.

Evaluator characteristics emerging from the interviews concern mostly the principal evaluator who has been in contact the longest with other evaluation partners (other evaluators had shorter contracts). The NGO hired him based on his expertise in the field of health equity in the Sahel Region and on the fact that he "*had a plethora of publications on the subject [and that] he is very implicated and skilled*" (ECHO Representative 1). The evaluator was described as one who seeks out pertinent knowledge, who is friendly and with whom a relationship of mutual trust was established. As one stakeholder mentioned, "*we really feel that he wants things to work and he wants things to change [...] even in between evaluations we can always address our questions to him*" (HELP Staff 4). As an evaluator suggested, another important resource was the staff member hired to coordinate the scientific activities in Burkina Faso (External Evaluator 3). As one stakeholder said, "*we ourselves don't have the scientific expertise to take on the evaluation responsibilities*" (HELP Staff 4). Numerous evaluation partners affirmed that the evaluators are regularly emailing documents for program or funding opportunities and that collaboration has become routine. The links between the evaluation activities and EU by evaluation partners seem indeed supported by the quality of the relationship among the partners of the evaluation strategy.

Hence, interviews show that a number of important evaluation- and evaluator-related factors are already associated with some of the intended outcomes. For example, the ability of evaluation partners to trust and rely on the expertise of the principle evaluator and his ongoing and honest communication with NGO stakeholders. Another example included the evaluation approach that is participatory and utilization focussed that together act as factors strengthening the link between evaluation activities and the intended outcomes (e.g. increased documentation, understanding and diffusion of the exemption program's effects). These factors appear to support the plausibility of the evaluation strategy.

4.2.2. Plausibility: contextual factors

Alkin and Taut's (2003) description of the contextual factors include "*inter- and intra-organizational characteristics, as well as external community factors*" (p. 5). Generally favorable intra-NGO factors have been alluded to throughout this article including the strong collaboration among evaluation partners, the fairly stable NGO context (i.e. little turnover), and the funds allocated to develop the evaluation strategy. Although little was said about the external factors, many did emerge during the interviews. As several participants noted, local politicians are reluctant to the concept of fee exemptions as they have been accustomed, over the years, to the principles and logic of cost recovery strategies where patients pay user-fees. Nevertheless, recent political decisions are more favorable to user-fee exemptions such as Burkina Faso's 2006 exemption policy that covers 80% of obstetrical and neonatal emergencies fees (SONU) in order to minimize financial barriers to health care accessibility (Amnesty International, 2010). Moreover, as an evaluator indicated, Burkina Faso's context of political decentralization has enabled the regional and district level Ministry of Health authorities to partake in the NGO's exemption program without requiring consensus from the national authorities. Embarked on the exemption program, they are witnessing

enhanced utilization of health centers by the targeted populations (HELP, 2008). Their political position and ability to testify on the merits of the exemption to their national level Ministry of Health colleagues undeniably support the evaluation strategy's advocacy goals (*External Evaluators 3 and 8*). Moreover, a consultant working intermittently with HELP describes the current Burkinabe public health policy context as increasingly favorable to EU whereby even government programs must prove their worth (*External Evaluator 5*).

At a global level, the elaboration of the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals (MDG) includes specific objectives to improve maternal health and to reduce child mortality (United Nations, 2009). According to one evaluation partner the MDG influence donor agencies and African policy-makers to increasingly seek out evidence based knowledge on alternatives to direct payment in order to improve maternal and child health (*External Evaluator 5*). An external evaluator also specified that another potential influence includes Amnesty International's (2010) report on maternal mortality (*External Evaluator 5*). Such external pressures may indeed come to influence political receptivity to HELP's documentation and advocacy efforts.

4.2.3. Plausibility: human factors

According to Alkin and Taut (2003), human factors include intended users' (i.e. the evaluation partners') organizational, personal and professional characteristics. These same authors also suggest that the most important features are the intended users' interest and commitment to evaluation and its use. In this respect, the donor representative underlined that it is due *"to the greatly motivated NGO team who found other very motivated and competent people that we are now hopeful of having a mid-term impact on Burkina Faso's national policies"* (ECHO Representative 1). As he said, documentation and advocacy activities were not initially part of the mandate. Evaluators on their side, affirm that NGO stakeholders show a keen interest toward EU, an unusual openness toward constructive criticism and are particularly proactive in rectifying glitches in their practises that were unveiled by evaluations (*External Evaluators 3 and 8*). For example, prior to the first evaluation, the NGO's exemption program was run in parallel to the state's health system and the principal evaluator recommended that NGO stakeholders strive to integrate their intervention within Niger's health system. As the evaluator stated *"they completely reorganized the way they worked"* around evaluation recommendations. Remarking also on the positive collaboration with the DRS/MCD, one evaluator said *"the first phase enabled us to establish a relationship with them [...] they found interest in our documentation activities and we were motivated to have them participate"* (*External Evaluator 3*). One MCD said *"I can see that the evaluations are pointing to data that will help us improve what we do on the field"* (Minister of Health 15). He also mentioned his concern regarding the exemption's sustainability fearing that the state cannot absorb the financial costs of maternal and child health. But as he said *"maybe with the advocacy activities that we are targeting towards the national level, it will permit decision takers to be more implicated, to see that it is a reality, that it's possible in any case to ameliorate health accessibility via the exemption program"* (Minister of Health 15). Interviews made apparent that human factors were definitely in support of the evaluation strategy's goal attainment acting as reinforcing links between the resources, activities and goals of the evaluation strategy.

4.3. Accessibility of relevant data

Wholey's (1994) third condition concerns the availability of meaningful data. Undeniably, all evaluation partners contacted were receptive to partake in a future EU evaluation study and

provided ample information about their collaboration within the evaluation strategy. Evaluation partners were already able to identify numerous occasions where evaluations had been used and useful supporting the assumption that relevant data will be accessible via the evaluation partners.

Evaluation use was indeed observed at different levels of the evaluation strategy. For example, *organizational level* changes were manifested when the evaluation partners attempted to integrate the evaluation strategy into the exemption mandate. Another example was seen when HELP's stakeholders sought out more collaboration from the district and regional Ministry of Health following the evaluators' recommendation to heighten their integration within the national health system. Evaluation use at the level of the exemption program was also identified. For example, an Action-Research project demonstrated that many community members were not informed about the NGO's exemption and so many women who could have received medical assistance had unattended deliveries. As one participating MCD affirmed *"we realized we needed to double our sensitization efforts. This is included in our 2010 action plan"* (Minister of Health 15). Capacity building via process use also seems apparent as various evaluation partners explained they understood better and were more skilled in their respective work at using evaluation methodology and data, logic models, and public health knowledge after participating in evaluation activities. For example, several evaluation partners noticed their heightened ability to write research/evaluation reports and scientific articles after having participated in an Action Research project. Others who collaborated as evaluators in the evaluation strategy noted gains in their capacity to interview participants efficiently and in their ability to analyze quantitative data as a result of working with, and learning from, the principal evaluator. Collectively, these examples clearly demonstrate a rich variety of EUs by the evaluation partners and that obtaining such information from participants during a future evaluation is feasible.

Evaluation partners also shared with us various types of documents pertaining to their evaluation and advocacy efforts. These documents include evaluation activity plans and reports, scientific articles, policy briefs, poster and oral presentations, conventions with partnering organizations, and over 500 relevant emails between themselves. These documents help clarify the preliminary model and corroborate interview data. In conclusion, there is no doubt that evaluation activities are abundant at the NGO, that an evaluation culture is emerging, and that evaluation partners are able and willing to provide sufficient information and material for a comprehensive examination of EU.

5. The utility of an evaluation use study

The fourth condition identifies potential users' intended uses of an evaluation (in this case of the evaluation strategy) (Wholey, 1994). While most participants took advantage of the evaluability assessment to share their concerns regarding the evaluation strategy, many also suggested that evaluating EU would enable them to improve their work. More specifically, evaluation partners made clear that while the general development of the evaluation strategy has been surprisingly productive, important concerns remain. For instance, when examining the goals of the evaluation strategy it became clear that the respective weight attributed to various forms of EUs varies slightly across the evaluation partners. That is, for some (e.g. NGO staff), evaluations serve primarily to identify and rectify glitches in, or validate, the exemption's implementation. Conversely, other evaluation partners (e.g. DRS, MCD, and donors) focalize more on accumulating evaluation-based knowledge to drive the advocacy efforts and support political decision-making processes. Although these refer to different

categories of EU in the literature (see Rich, 1997; Weiss, 1998), they are compatible and fit collectively nicely within the preliminary logic model. Nevertheless, it implies that evaluators are striving toward numerous short- and long-term goals at once and interviews revealed how this has provoked some confusion and tensions among the evaluation partners. This will need to be addressed in order to facilitate further collaboration.

Other related concerns were raised by participants. For example, some suggested that evaluation goals and the potential benefits of conducting evaluations were not always clear. One NGO stakeholder reported that some staff members have reported feeling as though evaluators come and go as they would in a laboratory, they collect data and then they leave (*HELP Staff 4*). Stakeholders believe these feelings maybe due to a lack of communication between the NGO staff and the evaluators on, for example, evaluation goals and timing. While it was noted earlier that evaluation partners communicated regularly, stakeholders expressed a desire to have more formality in their communication. They want meetings to underline the goals, collaboration plans, procedures, and general time-frame of evaluations in order to coordinate evaluation activities and to minimize misunderstandings. An evaluator acknowledged these needs and affirmed that they are increasing their efforts in this direction. Evaluating the evaluation strategy may help assess current communication and discern any ongoing difficulties in this sense.

Another challenge evaluation partners noted regards the level of participation that evaluations require. In general, evaluators found their partners remarkably committed to evaluations but some irregularities and resistances were noted. Some evaluation partners admit that despite their motivation, it is difficult to integrate evaluation activities to their busy schedules. One MCD noted that his health center staff complained about the sheer number of evaluations (*Minister of Health 14*). One NGO staff noticed that evaluations requiring NGO resources (e.g. vehicles) provoke more resistance as it sometimes conflicts with the NGO's own interventions (e.g. routine health center supervisions). The challenge, according to evaluators, is for their partners to abandon the idea of parallel and disconnected mandates but rather aim for a real integration of the evaluation strategy into the exemption mandate. Several participants evoked the need to further understand the factors that constrain the level of participation in the evaluation activities of some of their colleagues. This reflects at once the utility of an EU evaluation study for participants and the

need in the scientific community to further our knowledge of participatory evaluations (Daigneault & Jacob, 2009).

An additional key challenge concerns the respective pace and priorities of the three domains in which evaluation partners are involved: humanitarian emergency relief (the NGO), policymaking (Ministry of Health representatives), and evaluation (evaluators). As a research consultant commented “*politicians are sometimes pressured to take decisions before evidence-based data are even available or in directions that contradict available data*” (*External Evaluator 5*). As he sees it, the role of the evaluation strategy is to make evidence available for decision makers. The rhythms of these different domains rarely coincide. Moreover, while documentation activities require time, emergency funds do not permit to plan activities on a long term basis and as one evaluator said “*we are obliged to juggle with different agendas*” (*External Evaluator 8*). This places the entire mandate in a challenging position. Seen as the exemption program is based on short-term humanitarian funding, evaluation partners are striving to convince policy-makers and donors to adopt and fund the exemption program in a more sustainable manner, an objective the NGO cannot afford. Several participants suggested that the NGO should be relieved of its funding responsibility and instead provide technical and evidence-based assistance to the exemption strategy. According to one participant, a comprehensive evaluation of EU conditions may therefore, provide suggestions as to ways that evaluation/documentation and advocacy strategies may be improved to support the adoption of a sustainable exemption policy by the state (*ECHO Representative 1*). Generally, intended users agree that an evaluation study on EU has two broad utilities: (1) to help improve evaluation partners' teamwork and in turn (2) to assist the evaluation strategy's mandate.

Finally, a summary of the findings relevant to the four conditions of feasibility, which we deem fulfilled, is illustrated in Table 3.

6. Discussion

Wholey's (1994, 2004) evaluability framework has enabled us to examine four conditions and in turn ascertain the evaluability of the NGO's evaluation strategy. However, certain limitations constrain the scope of our findings. First, seen as we did not interview all evaluation partners the results may not represent the view of them all. Results may be more representative of those in Burkina Faso where a greater number of interviews were conducted. On the other

Table 3
Summary of the findings.

Evaluability conditions	
(1) Program intent and logic model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The logic model illustrates the progression of scientific activities, the evaluation partners' shared goals and commitment to EU onto a coherent timeline. • The preliminary model provides an important blueprint orienting our future evaluation study
(2) Plausibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results suggest a multitude of factors are aligned with the evaluation strategy goals <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Evaluation factors: an approach that is participatory and utilization focussed; Evaluator factors: an expert, adheres to exemption goals, trusting relationship, provides ongoing support (2) Context factors: relatively stable NGO personnel and funds, the local and global political climate is increasingly favorable to exemption programs and to evidence-based knowledge (3) Human factors (evaluation partners): motivated, competent and proactive with EU • Evaluation strategy activities are progressing well and are deemed as helpful by participants
(3) Accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants demonstrated they were involved in the evaluation strategy and with EU thus attesting to the presence of relevant data • Participants accepted to partake in a future evaluation study on EU during which they would provide more relevant information • The NGO's evaluation strategy provides an EU-rich environment presenting a great case to explore EU in a humanitarian context
(4) Utility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants agreed to partake in a future evaluation study hoping it may foster further EU • Participants underlined challenges needing further examination and sensitivity • Participants suggest evaluation study of EU may help improve their effective teamwork and support the success of the evaluation strategy

hand, we deem it less essential to interview all evaluation partners for the evaluability assessment than it will be in the future and more comprehensive evaluation study of EU.

Another possible limitation concerns the role of the external evaluators within the NGO and the issue of objectivity. According to Patton and LaBosière (2009), an evaluator's role varies with evaluation goals. When the goal is to determine a program's global value, evaluators act as judges but when the goal is to help improve a program they act as advisors. In the context of the exemption program, both mandates apply and external evaluators have negotiated a combination of these positions. Indeed, the relationship between the external evaluator and other evaluation partners dates from 2007 and may influence our results by limiting the expression of any discomfort or disapproval among evaluation partners or generally toward evaluation. Our current and future interviews may therefore be tainted by a normative discourse.

Wholey's evaluability assessment (EA) framework provided very helpful guidelines for the current assessment. However, attempting to adapt his framework was no easy task. A recurrent issue concerns the idea of thresholds for what qualifies enough versus too little evidence to consider a condition met. For example, how much evidence do we need before assuming that the goals of the evaluation strategy are appropriate and feasible? Or another example concerns the third evaluability condition which examines whether relevant "performance data" can be obtained. Performance data makes sense in a summative evaluation but it is less intuitive in the current case where our future process evaluation will be exploratory and where a "performance" measure of EU is difficult to conceive and not really our aim. Seeking through the literature to see how other researchers have dealt with this issue proved to be futile because to our knowledge no authors have addressed this point. We therefore decided that any form of EU would provide some support for the relevance of evaluating the evaluation strategy. The interviews actually revealed that EU is very prolific among the evaluation partners and so it turns out that the issue was not problematic in our case. But, what constitutes a satisfactory amount or kind of the studied phenomena to ascertain that the condition is met remains an ambiguous element of the framework. We could not agree more with Trevisan's (2007) statement that "there is considerable work the evaluation field could do to improve the implementation and use of EA" (p. 298). Trevisan (2007) also pointed out that "there is little guidance on the actual implementation and use of EA" (p. 299) and that the concept and method of EA lacks clarity. While different EA frameworks exist (see Smith, 1989; Thurston, Graham, & Hatfield, 2003; Trevisan & Yi, 2003), none seemed particularly helpful in resolving the difficulties we encountered. We chose to use Wholey's framework as his work is very prominent in the evaluation literature and his framework is simple and targets the four conditions that seemed most crucial to examine in the current case study. While it was our chosen model we still would recommend future evaluability assessors to consider the different EA frameworks described in the literature and choose the most fitting for their context and objectives. Trevisan's (2007) article presents an overview of the state of EA practice over time and provides interesting insights regarding the uses and methodologies of EA. In the current context, conducting an EA was a crucial step that validated the idea of realizing an evaluation study of EU and at the same time helped orient this upcoming evaluation study. As Thurston et al. (2003) suggest, "EA is a cost-effective solution recommended by the authors for projects in formative stages looking for assistance in direction, evaluation, and setting up a monitoring system" (p. 220). Wholey's framework offered suiting guidelines for our EA but further research clarifying EA's various uses and methods in diverse contexts may prove useful for other researchers needing to glimpse at their study context in order to secure the feasibility of their endeavor.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, numerous authors have documented the gap existing between the production of knowledge and its application in general practical settings including within the humanitarian sector (Ahmed, 2005; ALNAP, 2001; Bellman, Webster, & Jeanes, 2011; Crewe & Young, 2002; Crisp, 2004; Dobbins, Ciliska, Cockerill, Barnsley, & DiCenso, 2002; Karan, 2009; Lomas, 1991; Proudlock, Ramalingam, & Sandison, 2006; Sandison, 2006; Utterback, 1974). Especially in the health and humanitarian sectors, such a research–practice gap can have deleterious effects on vulnerable populations (Adhikari, Maskay, & Sharma, 2009; Dobbins et al., 2002; Wood et al., 2001). The World Health Organization (2004) stipulated that the "links between health systems and health research systems need to be strengthened to generate and use relevant knowledge" (p. 1). Furthermore, Hoffman et al. (2012) highlight that efficient investments in health systems rely heavily on empirical evidence and it is for that reason that the World Health Organization will target exactly these issues in an upcoming 2012 report. The current NGO's exemption program is making great strides to facilitate health care access for vulnerable populations (Ridde, Queuille, et al., 2012). With the intent to bolster the NGO's efforts via the use of scientific knowledge, evaluation and advocacy activities have been integrated to the exemption program in Niger in 2007 and from the start of the Burkina Faso mission in 2008. As Young (2005) noted, financial barriers challenge the production of research throughout Africa and limit access to institutions and trained manpower for the production of high quality empirical research. International organizations, such as the current NGO and its donors (ECHO), that are able to fund and produce scientific knowledge, are still confronted by such questions as "what makes a good evaluation with high chances of being used?" Indeed, the success of the evaluation strategy relies heavily on the assumption that evaluations will be utilized. An evaluation study of EU that is now deemed feasible has the potential to clarify a number of critical issues in this respect.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was granted from the ethical committee of the Université de Montréal. Following a description of the study's objectives and procedures, evaluation partners' participation was solicited and in positive responses the setting and time of interviews were determined according to their preference. Interview transcriptions were anonymized to conserve the confidentiality of the participants.

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